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Helping Children Learn and Grow: Becoming an Elementary Teacher

by Fariah Zainuddin

(English 1102)

Who is a good teacher, and what does he/she do? Janet Fine is the author of six books on education and is a journalist. In her book *Opportunities in Teaching Careers*, she answers this question by quoting the author Gilbert Highet (who wrote *Teaching – the Immortal Profession: the Joys of Teaching and Learning*) who says: “the good teacher believes in the subject and is genuinely, unashamedly enthusiastic about it” (qtd. in Fine 5). Kathleen Mellon, 2004 Teacher of the Year, said that “[l]ife provides few opportunities to affect the world...the connections teachers and students make provide the chance to make a profound difference” (qtd. in Fine 6). According to Fine, one of the greatest motivations of teaching is knowing that the “commitment to the learning process of a child will shape the child’s future.” She says that the most basic and important role of a teacher is to encourage learning. From the time I can remember, I have loved children and absolutely enjoy spending time with them. I have always been unsure of what I wanted to pursue as my career, but I do know one thing for sure--it will definitely have to do with children. As I was researching about elementary education, I realized how well it would fit with what I have wanted. I like to teach and know I have what it takes. When exploring the education field, it is important to know the steps in the process to becoming a teacher and what to expect from the job.

There are some qualities necessary for the education field. Mary Clement was director of the Beginning Teacher Program at Eastern Illinois for six years. She is currently an assistant professor of education at Berry College. She talks about these necessary qualities. She says that it is very important to have a passion for teaching and have leadership qualities. This is because they have to make decisions on what to teach as well as how to deal with students. They need to organize and manage their students and curriculum so that they can teach in the most effective way possible. Communication skills are very important for teachers as well. It is a vital skill not only to teach students, but for dealing with parents, teachers, and administration. Clement points out that teacher “serve as psychologists, nurses, parents, entertainers, and yes, even babysitters” (Clement 43). A good teacher enjoys working with people, likes to study, is enthusiastic about new ideas, likes to discuss new ideas with others, is creative, is good at expressing themselves and explaining things to others, and has a sense of humor (28).

Qualities are just as important as training for the profession. In order to become an elementary school teacher, says Clement, one must major in elementary education (also known as early childhood education). By attaining this major, one is generally certified to teach kindergarten through eighth grade. Mark Rohwl, the author of “Hot Jobs in Education” says that a teacher can have a minor in education with a major in the subject they are going to teach. By “helping teachers understand student behavior, a teacher can analyze situations and make effective and appropriate choices” (Clement 31). Education programs usually include a psychology class. It may be an introduction to psychology, or an educational psychology class. A majority of the course covers the development of students, and how differences can affect their studying. Some teacher education programs require one to take a course on psychology and education of exceptional children. This is also called a special-ed course, and includes a section on gifted children. Theories are also taught in psychology, as well as managing student behavior, outcomes of rewarding students, and how to grade and evaluate students.

It is a requirement to take curriculum classes. These classes include national and state

standards, and the history of education. One is taught how to choose textbooks and make interesting lesson plans. They also include how to make plans for units and semesters. Methods courses are a necessity as well and “basically teach one how to teach” (Clement 31). One is taught how to teach science, math, social studies, and language arts. One may have to take additional classes on teaching health, physical education, art, and music, since some schools do not have specialists for these areas. The course includes how to answer questions and how to ask them. A classroom management course is also a necessity covering both theoretical and practical. These classes are specific to grade level since management strategies vary by age group. Most teacher education classes include “field experience and student teaching” as well (31).

Field experience is a very important factor for teaching. According to Peter Cookson, author of “Your Ideal Classroom” there are some things one will learn only from experience that cannot be taught in school. For example, teachers learn through experience that “learners have different learning styles” (Cookson 14). They will also come to realize that a truly successful teacher is “well grounded in their subject matter, dedicated to their student’s learning and willing to experiment with different teaching strategies.” Also that being respectful in relationships with students’ parents, and being supportive of colleagues, will make them successful in the field.

Once a person has obtained all the necessary education requirements, it is now necessary to take certifications exams in order to test basic abilities. According to the U. S. Department of Labor, in general, it is required for “public school teachers...[to] have at least a bachelor’s degree, complete an approved teacher education program, and be licensed” (Certification 1). Each state though, has slightly different kinds of certifications and requirements. The Illinois State Board of Education requires all teachers to have a full certificate, a bachelor’s degree, and “demonstrate competence in every core subject they teach” (2). It states that all teachers of public elementary schools who teach core academic subjects must meet the “Highly Qualified” requirement (3). To be a Highly Qualified (HQ) teacher, one must “demonstrate competence...[and] hold a full certificate, bachelor’s degree, AND have a major, or state exam, or advanced degree, or advanced certificate in every core subject taught” (4). A recent federal requirement is that every new elementary teacher who teaches below grade 6 must pass a test to be considered HQ. Illinois has three certifications. The first, is called the initial teaching certificate, and is for those teachers who have practiced for less than four years. This certificate is issued to college graduates, and is good for four years. The second is a standard certificate, which initial certificate holders are required to move to on completing four years of teaching with a valid certificate. The third is a master teaching certificate.

Since we now know what the requirements are for becoming an elementary teacher, it is important to understand what will be expected on the job. Here is what elementary school teachers do. The authors of *Careers in Focus* talk about what jobs teachers do. They say that in the first and second grades, teachers cover only “basic skills” (Careers in Focus 58). These include reading, writing, counting, and telling time. With older grade levels, teachers cover math, social studies, hand writing, and English. Teachers spend a lot of time on reading, “language arts,” and mathematics. Social studies and science are covered every day as well. Teachers of higher grade levels make their students write in journals, instead of talking. Teaching usually takes place by making small groups of 4 to 5 students, especially in the younger grade levels. While one group is being taught, the other groups may be instructed to read silently or draw. This strategy is usually used for teaching language arts and reading. The remaining subjects (math, science, social studies, and history) are taught through fun topics such as “pollution, transportation, the earth.” Students read books that are related to the topic being taught. Learning and teaching is a fun experience in elementary teaching. Teachers include lots of arts and crafts projects to capture the student’s attention. In the upper grades, teachers assign oral and written reports and have them involved in student projects. These higher-grade levels usually have a curriculum set by the state. When working with these children, elementary teachers need to “instruct social skills along with general school subject” (59). Health, physical education, art,

and music may be taught either by special teachers, or by the classroom teacher itself. The most time consuming part of teaching is making lesson plans. First time teachers usually have a heavy work load because they do not have the previous year's plans to work off of.

To get an even better feel of what it is like to be an elementary teacher, here is a general day described by Clement. Most elementary schools start early, around 7:30AM to 8:00 AM, and teachers are required to come in a little earlier. Each teacher has about 20 to 30 students in his/her class. The teacher typically starts out by completing certain tasks such as taking attendance, checking home work, and doing lunch counts. Students are then given time to "calm down," so that they can get ready for a day of learning (Clement 44). Clement states that this is important to do so because young children bring personal problems to school, and by allowing the children to talk about them, "students...settle into a routine for the day." The teacher gets on with the different subjects for that day. Lunch is usually short, and teachers may have to accompany their students in the cafeteria. Teachers get bathroom breaks just when they have a chance! School days end around 2:30 to 3:00 PM, and teachers usually spend this time after school planning and organizing. This is also a perfect time for "grading papers, meeting with parents, and faculty meetings." Teachers are generally required to work in their classrooms for at least a half hour after school, before they can leave for home. Teachers, who are allowed to leave when the students do, usually take their paperwork home with them where they can continue their planning and grading.

Not only do teachers work in school, but according to the Institute for Career Research, teachers spend about 40 percent of their time working outside of the classroom. They may be required to take turns doing cafeteria, hall, or bus duty. Teachers of lower grade levels may have to supervise their students on the playground. In the upper grade levels, teachers "supervise study halls, homerooms, and chaperone fieldtrips" (The Institute for Career Research 8). They might additionally have to become an advisor or supervisor for extracurricular activities such as sports teams or clubs. After school, they may have to spend extra time with students to help them out. They also spend time in meetings with colleagues, students, and parents. Teachers do have to take work home. The higher the grade level, the more time consuming it is to plan lessons, prepare projects, and grade papers. About 4 to 8 times a year, teachers have to come to school and work while the students get a holiday. School districts have "in-service training days" which are mandatory. This gives teachers an opportunity to "update their skills through discussions, lectures, and workshops." Attending workshops and seminars is mandatory. It gives teachers the opportunity to learn new things. Seminars usually do not cost anything. Typically, a school district pays teachers for the hours that they attended, or for the units they earn towards continuing their education.

Other than working outside of school, it is vital for teachers to interact with people other than their students. There is usually a staff meeting with colleagues once a week to discuss school issues. In order to be a happy teacher and have a good experience teaching, one must have good relationships with his/her fellow teachers. As the authors of the book *Your First Year as an Elementary School Teacher*, say that "[m]uch of your success as an instructor—even happiness as a teacher—relies on your relationship with your campus colleagues" (298). A teacher has to be able to work in collaboration with other teachers, and "one of the joys of teaching is finding colleagues that will help you" (35). Teachers are in constant communication with parents. There are about four scheduled parent-teacher conferences annually, and teachers may have to additionally meet with parents. Sometimes they have to work together with parents in order to help students succeed.

Helping students is definitely the biggest advantage of being a teacher. Luckily, there are additional advantages and attractions in the field according to the author of *So You Want to be a Teacher*. Teachers have the same hours as children, and thus it is considered family friendly. The author of *Opportunities in Teaching* says it is a good profession for parents because of the holidays and breaks. The authors of *Your First Year as an Elementary School Teacher* say that a very important advantage of the field is that teachers get retirement plans and good benefits. Most states

have “tenure laws” that prevent teachers who are working in public schools from being fired without due process (Rominger 358). Teachers obtain tenure only after they have completed a satisfactory “probationary period of teaching.” This period is usually only about three years. Teachers are often offered a choice of plans for medical, dental, and vision benefits. One can get complete benefit packets that include maternity and paternity leave as well. Relocating in this profession is much easier than in many others. Thus, there is an “ease of exit and reentry into the teaching profession” (Clement 2).

Another good advantage for becoming a teacher is getting benefits from unions/associations which can be very necessary for the field. The main reason many teachers join unions or associations is for “liability insurance” (Rominger 354). This means that if a teacher is ever faced with a lawsuit while at school or off campus, the association would pay about \$1 million in liability coverage. This amount depends on the state association. Another good reason to join a union is to support it for its “contract negotiations.” These negotiations deal with work days, salaries, and working conditions. The union can also be of assistance in case a teacher “files[s] a grievance” against someone in their school district level. Some unions have “credit unions” which give discounts on auto insurance and “access to home and auto loans.” Some districts also offer “long-term liability insurance” which gives a teacher a portion of their income once their “sick leave days...[are] used up” (356).

Unfortunately, there can also be a down side to joining these unions. Rominger says that majority of unions require a membership fee. Teachers that are starting out usually are struggling financially, and thus it can become a problem to join. Union fees can go by districts, and some unions have flat rates. Others base it on the teachers’ salary. An important thing to check before joining a union is whether or not the union dues are tax-deductible. In most districts teachers have the option of whether they want to join a union or not.

A big national education association is the NEA (National Education Association) which has many state chapters under it. The Illinois association is called IEANEA. Teachers can become members of NEA and receive various benefits “including discounts” (Benefits np). When asked about the fees for Illinois, a NEA representative said that the membership fees varies and depends on whether a teacher is working part time or full time as well as the location. Usually additional local dues apply. The base fee for an “employed full-time certified teacher for the year 2006-2007 is \$542.00 plus local dues” (NEA Representative).

It is obvious that this field has a lot of attractions and advantages to it, but as with any other career it has its disadvantages as well. Fine says that the biggest disadvantage is that teachers do not make much money, although their jobs are stable and secure. As mentioned before, they need to spend long hours outside of class and the job can become monotonous. The U. S. Department of Labor says that the job can sometimes become frustrating. It can be very hard and challenging to deal with “unmotivated or disrespectful students,” and sometimes even violence (U. S. Department of Labor 4). Teaching may involve heavy workloads, teaching large classes, and making students meet mandatory standards. This can become very stressful. Working in an old school can be frustrating as well due to the lack of amenities. Most teachers who work in public schools are frustrated by “the lack of control they have over what they are trying to teach.” It is hard work, but “it is what makes a difference in the lives of boys and girls and, ultimately, in the future of the nation” (Fine 120).

Overall, the advantages outweigh the disadvantages and this is why I have chosen to go into this field. There are a large number of elementary school teachers currently employed, and there are various different places where they are needed. The author of *Careers in Focus* says that there are currently 1.4 million to be exact. Teachers are hired in public and private schools as well as parochial and Montessori schools. They are needed in day cares as well charter schools. The Occupational Outlook Handbook online says that the number of teachers that will be employed also depends on the local and state expenditures for education and on “the enactment of legislation to increase the quality and scope of public education” (U. S. Department of Labor 9). Overall, the supply of teachers is

going to increase because of “improved job prospects, better pay, more teacher involvements in school policymakers, and greater interest in education.”

Despite the fact that there will be an increase in the supply of teachers, we all know about the current shortage of teachers. According to the National Education Association, schools are having a hard time attracting and keeping quality teachers. This is a current issue in the education field. It says that this problem is due to the rising level in enrollments and the millions of teachers who are nearing retirement. They also say that we will need about 2 million new teachers in the next decade which will be a very significant in rural areas. Another reason for this problem is that teachers are still not paid well enough, and “are still not valued and respected to the extent of their actual contributions to society” (Teacher Shortage 1). A lot is being focused on bringing in new teachers, but not enough on keeping the already hired quality teachers. A recent study done by the NEA showed very surprising statistics: 20 % of new teachers leave their jobs within 3 years and 50% of newcomers in urban districts leave their job within 5 years. Teachers are leaving because they “feel overwhelmed by the expectations and scope of the job” (1). Many of them say that they “feel isolated and unsupported in their classrooms, or that expectations are unclear.” This is because new teachers are assigned the same tasks as experienced ones. This will create competition among some localities due to the shortage of qualified teachers. Districts will try to attract teacher with higher bonuses and pay. Through 2014, student enrollment into elementary schools will rise as slowly as expected due to the fact that “children of the baby boom generation leave the school system.” Enrollments in the Midwest in particular are expected to hold steady or maybe even decline.

So how easy will it be to get a job? This depends on a person’s training and certification, and “mastery of the knowledge, ...[the] ability to interview well, and perhaps...[the] willingness to move or commute to another area to gain experience” (Clement 7). The job market also depends on the location of the school. The average annual salary for public school elementary teachers for 2003-2004 was \$46,712. Each district has a different pay scale. Most districts have a “Step-and-column” pay scale (Rominger 19). A teacher can move down a step each year they are employed, and can move over a column by earning graduate degrees or units. One can earn these units either by taking college courses approved by the district, or by the accumulation of hours that could add up to form units. Some districts award their teacher “stipends” for completing graduate work. Rominger describes a stipend as a “monetary compensation for time you...invested in your job over and above regular teaching duties.” Schools districts have their own salary schedules, and they give schools merit pay for meeting certain standards. Currently, according to the Naperville Salary Schedule, a teacher with no experience and no extra units earns approximately \$39,831 in Naperville school districts. With 22 years of employment and 54 credit units, a teacher earns approximately \$97,479.

With the promising job outlook of the education field, teachers also have opportunities for advancement. The book *Careers in Focus* says that teachers can advance to becoming a supervisor or an administrator over the years with experience and meeting academic qualifications. Teachers also have the choice of becoming “senior or mentor teachers” (Careers in Focus 62). Here, they have the responsibility of assisting teachers who have less experience. Teachers can also move into higher education classes with additional education. With some addition preparation they can also become librarians, counselors, or reading specialists. According to Ben Wildavsky, author of *U. S. News and World Report*, this is the best time to get into the education field.

When exploring the education field, it is important to know the steps in the process to becoming a teacher and what to expect on the job. After doing all this research, getting a good feel for the job, and with my love for children, I think elementary education is the field I want to go into. According to the author of the book *So You Want to Be a Teacher*, a good teacher does his/her job by “preserving the best values of the past...[and] can make the future a better place in which to live.” Teaching gives one the opportunity to work with young people and help them learn, which is exactly what I want to do. The main reason elementary teachers say they teach is because they love children.

Albert Schweitzer, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, wrote in his autobiography that “[e]very great man was influenced in his life by a great teacher” (qtd. in Cultip 106). Reading these quotes inspires me greatly. I definitely want to have a chance to make a difference for the future.

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